

# Going to Fight in Iraq? Lessons From an Infantry Company Commander

By Capt. Daniel Morgan

Photographs by Dennis Steele



I have spent 11 months in Iraq fighting this war as a company commander, starting from the berm in Kuwait and going to Mosul in Iraq. My soldiers and I have learned a tremendous number of lessons, shared many successes and witnessed our share of horrific injuries. We never failed to conduct an after-action review (AAR) or a hotwash after an operation, despite the success, failure or casualties incurred, and now I want to share some tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) and standard operating procedures with as many as possible.

This fight ebbs and flows with short, shocking violence, so “always be prepared” is more than just a cliché. You will never know when you will be attacked—it just happens.



*'Treat every patrol as a movement to contact even though you may be out talking to people. At any time, a grenade can come from a rooftop and then you must go after the enemy with violence and speed of action.'*

An explosion rocks the vehicle in front of you, throwing soldiers onto the street. You see the vehicle rise up onto two wheels before settling and rolling to a stop. You hear AK-47 fire and rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) simultaneously.

Your soldiers stagger about trying to shake off the effects of the concussion. Some fire wildly in different directions because the cracking of the AK-47s is echoing off the buildings, preventing them from pinpointing the direction of fire. The battle drill says to clear the kill zone, but you have competing priorities. First, you have casualties that need to be secured, assessed and stabilized. Second, if you run, you will not kill the enemy or deter them. You must fight back and kill them. Do you stay in the kill zone and fight?

Attacks like these have happened to my company and me on several occasions and in various forms. One day, a platoon sergeant was hit, and it was a devastating experience for many soldiers. He survived, but when I first got to his truck he was a pile of blood and matter. His leg was completely blown off and he had shrapnel wounds all over him. He stayed there still trying to lead his soldiers while we secured everything. We fought back that day, killing one suspected enemy and detaining two more. We prevailed because of rehearsals, AARs, aggressive leadership at every level and discipline. Not much will change for months or even years in how we do daily business in Iraq. Operations will be basically broken down into four areas. First, you need to clear main supply routes of improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Second, platoons will conduct cordon and searches against a neighborhood, store, market or house. Third, units will conduct patrols to provide a presence in an area to enhance security. Finally, units will conduct civil-military operations simultaneously with the first three operations. These operations require patrolling in urban environments, mounted and dismounted, making soldiers vulnerable.

You must always be on the offensive. You cannot assume that you are just on a security presence patrol. Always treat it as a movement to contact. Company commanders must



plan every patrol with this mind-set and give specified tasks to accomplish the overall mission. For example, if you are going to conduct a patrol down a heavily congested market street to distribute information, treat it as a movement to contact and be on the offensive. Give a subordinate unit the task to distribute newsletters or flyers and use the remaining elements to provide security—be ready to fight. This offensive spirit increases force protection and prepares you to gain the initiative immediately upon contact.

I hope to provide leaders who come to Iraq, Afghanistan or anywhere else in the future some ideas for training and preparing to fight in this kind of environment. This environment consists of two factors—urban fighting and civil-military operations. The fight at the company level requires both skills and capabilities. Many factors are out of your control and many assets needed for stability and support operations (SASO) are not part of your division or brigade force structure, much less your battalion's. You must control what you can—urban patrolling, force protection,



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company-level information operations and home station training.

The more the terrorist succeeds in wounding or killing U.S. soldiers, the more he is emboldened to do it again. Your soldiers must be conditioned to fight back in an ambush. You will already have fire superiority 99 percent of the time, so use it immediately. Train your soldiers to scan rooftops, look across open fields (the enemy wants some standoff and the ability to run), and provide overwatch at every moment. These three factors are key when conducting mounted and dismounted patrols. You must do a patrol brief every time you depart the gate and



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never cease communicating and cross-talking.

The most important consideration in the urban patrol is the threat environment. Congestion and overpopulation in these areas can endanger any U.S. patrol at any time. If you lack enough boots on the ground, you can find yourself in a predicament where you can get overwhelmed by an angry mob. For example, you are leading a three-vehicle convoy in the city center with just a squad when three enemy insurgents attack with AK-47s. You return effective fire, killing or wounding the attackers. You dismount and secure the area. However, your return fire has upset many citizens who now surround your squad. This is a very





real dilemma. You can never take a patrol for granted.

The urban patrol, dismounted or mounted, must have sufficient boots on the ground to secure a casualty, set up an overwatch/support by fire position and maneuver. The challenge for any patrol is that, depending on the direction of the attack against it and the point at which it was attacked, every element must be prepared to assume each role. Leaders must establish standard formations with sectors of fire. If mounted, soldiers must face out 360 degrees (do not have the soldiers twist to look over their shoulders—see vehicle preparation), ensure soldiers alternate high-low in their sectors and always attack into the enemy to kill or capture them.

**P**atrols for improvised explosive devices require dismounted movement. A mounted patrol has limited ability to identify a potential IED and provides a likely target since the vehicles travel slowly. Vehicles can trail a dismounted patrol to provide rapid response if needed. The purpose is to identify an IED, to eliminate any target for the enemy and to destroy the IED in place. The IED patrol focuses on main supply routes, avenues of approach in and out of battalion and company command posts, and logistics package routes. These three routes must be cleared before any movement, demonstrating the importance of the IED patrol for a company.

IED patrols require dismounted soldiers with the lead team using binoculars, spotting scopes or some type of magnifying observation device. During limited visibility hours, patrols will need high-powered, hand-held spotlights. The lead clearing elements must have interlocking fields of observation and never hesitate to halt the patrol when coming across anything suspicious. The trail teams must provide overwatch so the lead teams can effectively search for IEDs. The trail team's secondary task is to maneuver against enemy forces and/or cordon the area. You must rehearse this patrol because it is paramount to saving lives.

Routine dismounted patrols must be conducted in sector, despite the risks. A mounted patrol through a sector fails to provide adequate presence and does not lend itself to winning the hearts and minds of the local population. The best way to mitigate risk is with more boots on the ground, meaning never patrol dismounted with less than a platoon. The dismounted patrol requires intense observation and readiness. Vehicles must be prepared to reinforce the patrol for an attack or exfiltration. These patrols must be conducted two to three times a week during specific times of the day to secure the environment and promote unity and cooperation in sector.

The dismounted patrol must have a purpose more than just a presence. Platoon and squad leaders must engage storeowners, bystanders and others to gather information. This provides the best means to a stable, cooperative company sector. Nevertheless, security precautions must still



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be taken to protect the troops.

First, three-dimensional observation must be maintained continuously. Second, communication between leaders, vehicles and the company command post cannot be overlooked—higher needs to know where you are. Third, treat

every patrol as a movement to contact even though you may be out talking to people. At any time, a grenade can come from a rooftop and then you must go after the enemy with violence and speed of action.

Leaders must be prepared to react to contact from any direction—left, right, front, rear or above. The urban area lends itself to distraction—pretty girls, vendors selling soda or ice cream, vehicle traffic, large crowds around vendors and more. In this threat environment, the enemy will choose the time, place and type of attack. After a brief attack, the enemy will run. It is up to you to react quickly enough to kill or capture them. Leaders must immediately maneuver against the enemy, while simultaneously isolating the area and providing overwatch for

the maneuver force and any casualties. Let the leader pull patrol members back if he needs the forces to conduct casualty evacuation.

The mounted patrol occurs every day and requires constant vigilance by every soldier. Leaders must have an SOP upon contact. If attacked and the situation permits, you dismount and fight or maneuver. Again, the course of action depends on the number of boots on the ground. If you are in a three-vehicle convoy with three soldiers per vehicle and you are attacked and receive casualties, you probably will clear the kill zone and report contact. The more you withdraw and do not fight back, however, the more they will attack. In boldness lies safety.

I adopted an SOP called the "Button Hook," which is derived from how a unit attempts to capture or kill a sniper. If a mounted patrol receives enemy machine-gun fire and RPGs, the Button Hook calls for the immediate cordon of the suspected area by surrounding the block with vehicles and sealing off possible enemy escape routes. The convoy commander simultaneously calls for OH-58D Kiowas to reinforce the cordon and to identify escaping personnel or suspected vehicles. If the convoy commander has the forces, he begins to clear the area from the most likely target to the least likely target. If he lacks the forces, he maintains the cordon and calls for the quick reaction force infantry. Soldiers cannot afford to relax during mounted patrols. In a four-vehicle patrol, the leader leads the convoy. The second truck maintains a mounted crew-served machine gun, as does the trail vehicle. The third vehicle can vary in its composition and purpose. The lead vehicle sets the speed and path of the convoy. Its main purpose is navigation and searching for possible IEDs. When passing under bridges, gunners must observe the approach and then the departure on the other side of the bridge. Everyone has a purpose.



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The lead vehicle has a challenge as it navigates through the city. This is the leader's responsibility and should not be delegated. For example, I was leading a convoy in the evening hours—a popular time for ambushes and IEDs. As we approached a vehicle with a driver inside, I saw him on a phone through his rear window. He spoke on the phone and drove away before we passed him. I immediately changed our route by taking a right through a neighborhood, avoiding the intersection. I do not know if we avoided a possible IED ambush or not, but it was better to suppose that this car and its driver were an early warning for an ambush. I was in a position to make a decision and to take action.

Enemy forces emplace IEDs at key intersections, where our vehicles slow down and get closer to one another. The lead vehicle needs to surround the convoy with civilian vehicles and allow them to intermix with the convoy. This tactic disrupts the enemy as he tries to target the convoy. In addition, speed of travel is an ally here. Leaders must balance speed and safety in their travels. The last thing that needs to happen is to run over Iraqi pedestrians and vehicles, or flip one of our own. It is harder to attack a convoy, however, if it is moving at a high rate of speed.

Leaders must have tactics, techniques and procedures on how to avoid IEDs and possible kill zones, but some risk areas are inevitable. For example, in an unavoidable intersection where we will turn right, my radio telephone operator (RTO) moves the vehicle as far left as possible. On turns, most IEDs, if not all, are placed on the inside turn. This left positioning as we turn right increases space between us and a possible IED. In addition, since we are turning right, I can observe and clear the left side of the road and curb of possible IEDs. I cannot see the right side until it would be too late. As we enter the turn, my RTO observes the traffic and we pick up speed, like a sling-shot, into traffic. Wide, fast turns protect the force.

Units will conduct hundreds of cordon and search operations—all different with varying degrees of aggressiveness. These operations emerge from human intelligence against a specific target or during a "neighborhood surge," meaning soldiers flooding an area to search homes with or without permission. The level of aggression will be determined by your command.

Basic task organization still applies, as every leader learns in military schools. However, units must never fail to isolate a target. Isolation of an objective is paramount in planning



these operations, especially in urban environments.

Urban environments present many threats, ranging from rooftop sniper shootings and drive-by shootings to civil unrest. Leaders must isolate the objective and subobjectives throughout the entire cordon and search operation. Isolation does not stop at the block where the house is located. It goes from there to the house to the front door and then into each room in the house. Isolating each portion of the objective protects your soldiers and allows you to react to any contingency that may arise during a search. Isolation requires more force, but it facilitates a smooth operation by reducing distractions and threats to your soldiers.

You must train your soldiers in battle drills and take the necessary preparation before arrival. We learned as we went along day-by-day. Habitual AARs and hotwashes are key to success, but training at home station or in an initial staging base before entering action will greatly improve your chances for success and survival.

Units must also prepare their vehicles for patrols and force protection in secure static positions. In addition, soldiers need to critique themselves and the unit to refine and



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improve their actions on the battlefield.

Training for this threat environment remains fairly standard—minus certain nonstandard situations that are not found in many mission-training plans. The urban environment in Iraq can be replicated at any military urban training site. I would focus on four aspects in training: marksmanship; casualty evacuation, including aerial evacuation; entering and clearing a building and room; and reaction to contact both when in a vehicle, a nonstandard task, and when dismounted. Each of these training areas must be graduated in difficulty and practiced in an urban threat environment. A unit that trains on these areas with unrelenting focus and discipline will succeed.

Marksmanship is the core of excellence for infantry soldiers. Their proficiency in killing wins the battle. The more you suppress the enemy here without killing or wounding him, the bolder he becomes in attacking you. You need to train your soldiers to aim, fire and kill. If an enemy opens fire with an AK-47 aimlessly, which most of these people do, you should be able to calmly place the red dot reticle of your M-68 optic device on his chest and kill him with one shot. If you do this, the rest will run and probably not come back. This skill takes training, patience and, sadly, experience.

Units must familiarize themselves with every weapon system in the battalion. Soldiers must know how to load, fire, clear and reduce stoppages and misfires on every crew-served weapon. In combat, because of personnel changeovers, a soldier may be behind a mounted .50-caliber machine gun or M240 machine gun at any given time. Full qualification may not be realistic, but soldiers certainly need to know how to operate crew-served weapons. Towards this goal, units must set up concurrent training at every range and include training on every weapon. Leaders should also familiarize their soldiers with hands-on training with foreign weapons, including AK-47s, RPKs,

RPG launchers and warheads, and PKMs. Soldiers will deal with these weapons daily.

Soldiers need reflexive and quick-fire training, using burst fire. Do not ignore 9 mm pistols, M249 squad automatic weapons and shotguns. This training is the most practical contributor to success in urban combat. As proficiency increases, leaders need to reduce target exposure times on computerized ranges. Enemy insurgents fire from rooftops and then hide, popping up and down. Soldiers also must practice weak-side shooting and tactical magazine changes on the reflexive firing range. Units must conduct a terminal effects demonstration on engine blocks, vehicle doors, concrete and other common materials, using *Field Manual 3-06.11* as a guide. This training will help leaders choose the right weapon system and facilitate decision making in combat. Last, let your soldiers move around on the range—from the zero range to the qualification range—with loaded weapons to reinforce muzzle awareness and safety.

Casualty evacuation requires training at every level. First, do not let a casualty take your focus away from a combat engagement. You must remember that your purpose is to fight and win. Let your first sergeant guide and direct casualty evacuations. Combat medics must train under the most realistic scenarios possible, using simulation and working on degrading symptoms. Many technologies exist in this area—find them and use them. Integrate casualties into everything, but with a focus on maintaining the fight against the enemy. Train every soldier in making assessments in prioritizing casualties, placing a tourniquet and calling in a four-line MEDEVAC.

Combat medics are a saving grace and will become your favorite and most valued soldiers. Unfortunately, the ratio between missions and medics is skewed, requiring training at the individual soldier level. Combat lifesavers must be maximized by the battalion, and do not forget your support platoon, who will drive more than anyone else in the battalion.

Supply your medics with four tourniquets each and each soldier with one. We use a mini-ratchet strap that is one-inch wide and long enough to wrap around the thigh. It is the most rapid means of saving a soldier from blood loss. Trust me, it saved four of my soldiers' lives, not counting another dozen in the battalion.

Mounted reaction-to-contact drills are a necessity. Units will move to and from many locations for missions and will be vulnerable when vehicle-bound. Leaders must focus on three areas in this training. First, soldiers must maintain 360-degree horizontal security and also alternate high and low vertical observation. Second, leaders cannot forget to practice dis-



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mount drills upon contact. Last, although never really accurate, soldiers must train on mounted firing while moving. These three areas are key to success in a mounted reaction to contact. Leaders must also consider the placement of their mounted weapons in the convoy. Remember, the heavy weapons often do no good if they are in the front of the convoy.

Company civil-military and information operations deserve serious attention from senior leaders. We lack the experience, training and resources in these areas at the brigade level and down. We need to implement this facet of full-spectrum operations more into our Army education system and equip the boots on the ground soldiers with these capabilities. These shortcomings are not an excuse for a lack of company effort in civil-military and information operations. Creativity and initiative by company commanders must make the difference.

Civil-military operations and information operations (CMOs and IOs) are not mutually exclusive. Commanders must take personal responsibility for these efforts. CMOs and IOs reinforce the success of each undertaking. The more successful CMOs are in your sector, the more positive your IOs will be for you. Brigade prioritizes CMOs at the company level, meaning that you are directed to focus on certain projects for the community. These projects will vary and involve things like schools, utilities, sanitation, and reconstruction. IOs, however, provide a company commander an opportunity to take control of his sector, earning the respect of local officials and citizens.

Information operations are simple at the company level. They have two purposes. First, they distribute information to the people. Uninformed citizens in a country we just subjugated in war have the potential to demonstrate and possibly riot. You must inform them of your goals and actions. Second, IOs involve not only passing out information, but they also require the collection of information. The development of an informed populace and the involvement of community leaders lead to advanced information about hostile threats and gain the unit credit for benevolent projects.

The first step in CMOs and IOs is to identify priority ar-

get out into the streets and meet people. We developed a "list of influence" in each area and began developing relationships.

On September 13, 2003, one of my platoons was ambushed, and three of my soldiers were wounded. The ambush occurred in a congested urban area with narrow alleys. After linking up with the platoon and conducting an aerial medical evacuation, a member of an Iraqi political party called me and said he saw the ambush and knew the attackers. The attackers were not home after the attack, but these men watched their houses for 48 hours and called me at 0200 to inform me when they had returned. The brigade commander then gave us approval to conduct a cordon and search operation, and we infiltrated the neighborhood, linked up with our informants and grabbed the attackers. This ambush had cost the leg of one of my soldiers, and through good relationships we had caught the culprits.

Leaders must understand the environment before blindly committing to some civil-military operations plan. I had no true understanding of the mind-set of the citizens in my sector. In addition, there were no performance measures to determine success. Consequently, I developed a survey of attitudes and needs in Arabic that was used across all my subsectors.

My soldiers hated this at first, but in the end we saw where we needed to be and what we needed to do. This situational understanding is vital to CMOs and IOs. Focus your company on valid, verifiable priorities.

Force protection must remain at the forefront. Protecting your soldiers requires a tough balance between safety and mission necessity. Many times in this environment leaders will avoid missions to protect soldiers.

This bad habit is not force protection. We protect soldiers to maintain combat power for mission accomplishment and to bring them home. Force protection has been alluded to throughout this discussion, but two areas demand specific attention—vehicle preparation and compound security.

Vehicle preparation before arriving in theater saves lives. Vehicles must be prepared to protect occupants from shrapnel and rifle/machine-gun fire. A tough decision must be



made with respect to sandbagging the trucks. The M998 Humvee will be operated for thousands of miles. The weight of a combat-loaded infantry squad with over 50 sandbags will deteriorate a M998 quickly. The sandbags will save the lives of soldiers, but will not protect the M998.

Armor plating along the doors and along the benches in the back of the M998 can protect soldiers. On December 26, 2003, we were ambushed while clearing an intersection of IEDs. After one explosion and a fusillade of fire from two enemy machine guns, we inspected the M998s and found that the armor plating withstood the explosion and machine-gun impacts, saving the lives of more than 10 soldiers. Armor plating must withstand 7.62 mm at a minimum. Get it on your trucks as soon as possible.

Security is a constant factor. During mounted move-

could only come from two locations on the same road. The unit could not shut down the road for an indefinite period of time, so the commander was limited in his options. He could emplace two checkpoints at either end of the road, which would require another platoon, or he could emplace ambushes at either end of the road at likely times based on previous drive-by shootings. If he chose the checkpoint course of action, he remained passive and would have lost another maneuver platoon to static security, reducing his flexibility and presence in sector. He chose the ambush option and ended up killing the enemy forces and destroying their vehicles. In the end, the drive-by shootings decreased dramatically in this area.

Commanders must implement a combination of active and passive measures to isolate their company compound as much as possible. Static security in an urban area also requires a presence outside the walled compound.

Commanders need to dispatch patrols during varying times, not only to clear IEDs, but to clear unoccupied buildings, search for fighting positions, occupy observation posts and more.

Active, aggressive methods that push your security blanket farther out from your walled compound protect your soldiers and allow them to rest and plan comfortably.

American soldiers are facing an enemy with a cell phone in one hand, an RPG in the other and an ill-conceived hatred in his heart. This enemy is asymmetric in the most unpredictable way. Technology can only enhance the

soldiers' capabilities, not act as a substitute for them. In the end, U.S. soldiers must meet the enemy—specifically terrorists—face-to-face, hand-to-hand and kill them. Company commanders must bring to bear creativity, aggressiveness and an offensive spirit to take away the enemy's will to fight.

In the end, U.S. forces must gather information on the enemy and then narrowly target them with overwhelming combat power.

Throughout this conflict, I discovered that most things taught in Army schools on the decision-making process remain valid and worth remembering. Here are the most important factors that were reinforced to me. First is the necessity to conduct combat AARs after every patrol, whether there was contact or not. Second, troop leading procedures are vital, especially when conducting a reconnaissance; rehearsals and terrain models and supervising platoon and leader operation orders and rehearsals are critical. Third, and most important, it is necessary to always maintain an offensive spirit.

Bold soldiers are dangerous, and boldness is what you want in this fight.



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ments in urban environments, leaders must prepare their vehicles to facilitate 360-degree security. We placed benches inside every Humvee and light medium tactical vehicle. I do not know if we were the first ones to do this, but we did recognize this early on, based on AAR comments by soldiers. An RPG will hit so fast that if soldiers are not in the proper security position when it is launched, they may never know the origin of fire. Using simple wooden benches that allow soldiers to sit back-to-back looking out improves security, increases offensive capabilities and enables units to gain the initiative quickly.

Static compound security remains ever present on the battlefield. Commanders need to balance mission requirements with protecting their company command post or battalion tactical operations center. Every compound will be on a road so vehicles can gain access. Some locations permit you to shut down all civilian traffic and some areas will not allow this isolation. The difference between successful and just-surviving compound security is the active versus passive measures taken by a unit.

Enemy forces conducted numerous drive-by shootings against a particular unit. The enemy avenue of approach